the Bellybuttons
The Season Of Romance
10/10
PKJ.

The

Bellybuttons

NOVEL 2
THE SEASON OF ROMANCE

PKJ·

CHAPTER 1

Like a Wednesday

So what if she's got a big nose
Because she's cute from lips to toes...

- Mpfff!

Startled awake, Karine gave her alarm clock a loud tap. The smooth voice of Chris Daryl, number one on Radio Hits' Top 50 for the past eight weeks, crackled to life. Once again, Jenny and Vicky had messed up the radio during their last sleepover.

Eyelids glued shut by sleep, Karine turned the knobs on her alarm clock to find Tips Infos, her usual station. A shrill voice and a cheerful jingle exploded in the room:

With a wide yawn, Karine headed for the bathroom. The ads continued to play, promising white teeth, monoi scrubs and miracle day creams. She turned on the tap and splashed herself with water, drowning out the noise of the voices. When she lifted her head, she sighed at the sight of her reflection.

She had many reasons to be depressed this October. First of all, it was Wednesday. Karine had to survive half a week of school before the weekend. Secondly, at 7 a.m., the mirror reflected a frankly discouraging image. Karine looked at her round face, her spiky blond hair and her too-long arms sticking out of her pyjamas. She may have been a high-school student, but she still looked like a preteen, with a child's face and a flat chest. She so wanted to be like her best friends, Jenny and Vicky, who turned all the boys' heads! Alas, nature had decided otherwise...

Resigned, Karine finished her routine, avoiding looking at herself. It was the usual: a brush here, a little deodorant there, and the familiar click-clack of the two barrettes clipping onto either side of her head. Then all she had to do was get dressed.

That morning, however, she looked at her closet without any enthusiasm. Her pink sweatpants and black tank top were waiting for her, their bland colors and soft fabric. At the thought of wearing them for the umpteenth time, Karine turned away, discouraged. Her gaze then fell on a poster forgotten among her school things. Karine unrolled it. Her heart leaped when she saw her photo on the glossy paper.

She wore a mauve top and held up a bunch of noodles, smiling. At the bottom of the poster, a slogan proclaimed, "Life's more beautiful, with a handful of noodles!"

Nostalgic, Karine folded up the poster. A few weeks earlier, she had enjoyed a whirlwind career in pasta advertising, following a casting session with Vicky and Jenny2. The noodle clip had been such a hit that she'd had to take on an agent to handle the flood of offers. Alas, after receiving anonymous threatening letters, she stopped everything. On the plus side, she had reconciled with Vicky and Jenny, who had died of jealousy at her success. But everything else had gone up in smoke. Goodbye, fame, spotlights, people's smiles... She was back to being Karine, the ordinary girl nobody noticed. All she had left was that crumpled poster and her outfit from the video. Do you think you're ugly, crumpled or old-fashioned? Does your mirror scare you?

The advertisement looped in her mind, haunting her. An idea suddenly occurred to her and she opened her closet wider. The purple top and black pants from the ad were there, impeccable. As if they were waiting for her. Without hesitation, Karine took them out.

"Oh my! There are at least forty of them today, Vicky!

With her eye glued to the keyhole, Jenny let out a delighted giggle. It was 8:20 a.m. and, once again, the girls' toilets were under siege. Jenny and Vicky had locked themselves in there to escape the horde of boys who had been fighting to get near them since morning.

That day, the halls were packed.

"It's because of my new lip gloss, that's for sure," Jenny sighed. Poor things... They already have a hard time resisting me in normal times!

- You bet!" says Vicky, who's standing in front of the mirror, reapplying her mascara. We're way too hot for the average high school. Inevitably, when they see us, it comes as a shock.

- How are we going to get out? The bell's about to ring, but they don't seem to want to leave... Exasperated, Vicky plugged up her mascara.

- What a bunch of losers! We'll have to go out the window again!

- Wait, wait!" exclaimed Jenny. They're moving...

- What, they're leaving before we escape?" snapped Vicky.

- Oh no, don't worry, it's nothing. It's Karine! Jenny opened the door a few centimetres. Shouts and declarations of love immediately flooded into the toilets. With the advantage of her spaghetti figure, Karine slipped through the doorway and closed behind her.

– Hey, girls! Phew, I thought I wasn't going to make it! The hallway is blocked all the way to the stairs...

Jenny pressed her hands to her mouth.

– Oh my God, Karine! What have you done?!

"What's that outfit?" Vicky adds, disgusted.

"Don't you remember?" said Karine with an embarrassed smile. I wore it for the noodle video...

Vicky and Jenny exchanged glances. Neither of them had forgotten the clip in question: they had been left out of the casting in favor of Karine. After that, they'd had to use every trick in the book to prevent her from pursuing her career. And now, suddenly, Karine was feeling nostalgic! Vicky pursed her lips.

- Jenny and I spent hours throwing away all your posters from that crappy ad. This is how you repay us? By putting that horrible thing back up?

Karine shriveled up visibly.

–It's just that... I like this outfit," she said in a very small voice.

- You like this? Are you kidding me? It looks like a sixties top! And I've told you a hundred times that mauve looks bad on you.

- Yes, but...

Vicky brandishes an authoritative hand.

– Look, let me be clear: Jenny and I have a reputation to uphold. We can't go around with a girl who dresses like an old woman. So you choose: either you throw this thing away, or you leave.

– But, I…

“All right!” Vicky said, leading Jenny by the arm. “If you prefer clothes to friends, that’s your problem. Have a good solo trip!”

- Wait, girls!" cried Karine just as Jenny was about to open the door.

The two accomplices exchanged a sly smile, then turned towards Karine, looking innocent.

– It’s… It’s okay, stammered Karine.

“Ah, perfect!” said Jenny, clapping her hands. “For a moment, I really thought you were going to get a real makeover!”

“Come on, hurry up and take that awful thing off,” Vicky cut in,

pushing Karine into one of the changing rooms. “You brought a change of clothes, did you?”

– Yes, stammered Karine.

It wasn't the first time she'd tried a new style of dress. Alas, her friends systematically forced her back into her jogging suit and tank top. She closed the door and changed, with a heavy heart. After all, Vicky was probably right: when you're ugly, nothing can change it. What was the point of trying to improve your looks?

- Come on, give me that," Vicky decreed as Karine came out, her outfit under her arm. Jenny, do you have your scissors?

"Yes! Great, I love crafts! exclaimed the redhead, shredding the sleeves.

Heartbroken, Karine witnessed the total destruction of her ensemble. Vicky threw it in the garbage without a second thought.

- A good thing done! she declared. And now, prepare to cross the Wailing Wall...

With a theatrical gesture, she opened the door. The nearest boys poured through the crack, trying to cling to their feet. Disgusted, Vicky and Jenny stepped over them, then wandered down the hallway without listening to compliments or declarations of love. They reached the cafeteria just as the bell rang.

"Frankly, it's becoming unbearable," Vicky said, adjusting her scarf over her frizzy hair. I wonder if there are any loser repellent sprays, it would make our lives easier!

- Totally!" sighed Jenny. Thank God for John John. He's the only 9/10 guy in this school. Without him, we'd be so bored!

“Are we talking about me?” a deep voice asked. The two friends shrieked: John John was walking into the cafeteria with a manly gait,

hidden behind a helmet with an opaque visor and a black leather biker suit. Karine had always thought he looked like a big insect, but Vicky and Jenny were far from having the same opinion: hysterical, they rushed towards him.

“John Joooohn! We looked everywhere for you yesterday,” Vicky cooed, hanging onto his arm. “We thought we were going to DIE of fear!”

"Without you and your Kawasaki Ninja, we're totally depressed," Jenny added, clinging to his other arm. "Don't you ever give us a scare like that again!"

- Sorry, ladies. My bike was being serviced, so I had to skip school to pick it up.

- Oh, so does this mean you'll be able to take me home tonight?" exclaimed Jenny. Say yes, John John, say yes!

- Hey!" protested Vicky. I live farther away than you, and besides, I was sick last week!

- What do you mean, sick? You spent your evenings going to the movies with a ton of guys!

- Well, that's just it! Maybe I've caught an infection!

- Are you in love?! Why do you want John John to take you home, then?

– An infection, moron! Not an affection!

"I forbid you to call me a moron!" Jenny exclaimed.

The two girls let go of John John and stood in front of each other, nose to nose. John John looked at his watch.

- Right, hens, sorry, gotta go. Draw lots to see who I get, but let me know soon: there's already a waiting list. See you there! He stomped out, followed by all the girls in the cafeteria. Vicky and Jenny sighed deeply.

- What a man!

- What a bike!

- Coming home with him is the only thing that motivates me to go to school," says Vicky. I've got two hours of maths this morning, what a bummer!

- And I've got to hand in my chemistry homework," says Jenny, slapping her forehead. Did you do it, Karine?

- The... The what?" stammered Karine.

- Duty at last! You were supposed to do it for me yesterday. Where is it?

Karine turned pale.

- I forgot.

- WHAT?

- I'm sorry!" stammered Karine. I already had Vicky's essay to write, it completely slipped my mind, I...

“Are you kidding?” said Jenny. “This is the most important homework assignment of the term!”

Karine rummaged through her bag, looking for the homework. It

was waiting for her, neatly stored in her binder. Alas, no miracle had happened: the four pages were still blank. Jenny's chin began to tremble.

- How could you forget that? I have to return it early this afternoon!

She began to sob her heart out. Vicky patted her on the shoulder and gave Karine a reproachful look.

- Well done! You had something to think about, it wasn't complicated!

- I'll... I'll do it this morning!" said Karine hurriedly. We'll meet at lunchtime in the canteen, and I'll give you the assignment! Is that all right? Jenny nodded, sniffling. Karine went to her first class with a sullen step. The day had barely begun, and she was already in low spirits.

1. No matter she’s got a big nose / Because she’s cute from tits to toes...
2. See The Bellybuttons – Novel 1: Top Model Or Nothing..

CHAPTER 2

The new

- And don't forget: I want your paper on Far Eastern trade relations next week. In it, you will detail in three parts the impact of...

Bring!

The 12:30 bell interrupted the history and geography teacher. In the blink of an eye, the sleepy students sat up, the binders slammed, and the chairs squeaked. When Karine looked up from Jenny's homework, which she had been secretly completing, she realized she was the last student in the class.

- It's a good thing there are serious high school students like you, Karine! says the teacher approvingly. Take your time finishing up your notes: I'll let you close the door behind you.

He left, leaving Karine alone in the room. She made the final calculations and reread the four pages of the assignment. Chemistry was far from her forte, but she'd done her best. With her stomach rumbling, she took long strides towards the canteen.

Normally, she would meet Vicky and Jenny in front of the entrance. It was pretty easy to spot them in the crowd: all you had to do was

walk up the line of boys who wanted to talk to them. On this day, however, neither Vicky nor Jenny were present. And, even stranger, Karine noticed that a horde of girls were crowding the refectory, eager to get in. They were all giggling and squealing with excitement.

Intrigued, Karine craned her neck to look over the heads. Thanks to her height, she could see inside the room and suddenly understood what all the fuss was about.

A new one.

She saw him from a distance, but that was enough for her: he wasn't the kind of boy who went unnoticed. He was tall and dark, with tight-fitting jeans and a white T-shirt that emphasized his muscular frame. When he turned around, tray in hand, all the girls murmured in admiration. It was simple: the stranger looked straight out of a fashion magazine.

He had very blue eyes, a square jaw and a long, lacquered lock that fell over his face, giving him an air of mystery. The students moved aside as he broke through the crowd and sat down, alone, at a table.

- He arrived this morning. He's in second B, in Mylène's class," squeaked a girl.

I'm so jealous!

- What's his name?

- Where's he from?

Karine extricated herself from the group to grab a tray. No matter how hard she looked, she couldn't find her friends anywhere in the self-service queue. She grabbed a terrine, a floating island and a plate of mashed potatoes, and wandered off between the tables. After a long time, she finally spotted Jenny's green hat in a corner of the room. Oddly enough, she and Vicky had taken a seat there, out of sight. Karine hurried to join them.

- Girls!" she exclaimed. Have you seen the new one?

Vicky raised an eyebrow.

- The atomic bomb at the entrance? Possibly, yes.

- He's so hot!" giggled Jenny, waddling back in her chair. If only someone had told me that one day I'd see a 10/10 in this ocean of tuna!

Karine glanced towards the other end of the canteen. The handsome stranger was still there, busy eating and tapping away on his smartphone.

- He's all alone," she remarked. Why don't you go and talk to him?

- Because we're sparing our effect," says Vicky smugly. And quit staring at him, you'll ruin everything!

She pulled Karine by her tank top, forcing her to sit down. Her tray hit the table with a clatter, drawing the attention of their neighbors.

“Do you understand the meaning of the word discretion?” Vicky hissed, irritated. “We didn’t hide in a corner for you to come and ruin everything!” Karine hunched her back to avoid scrutiny, then handed the chemistry homework to Jenny.

–Here you are! I finished it. I had a hard time with exercise 3, but you'll see, on exercise 5...

The redhead absentmindedly grabbed the sheets and stuffed them into her bag. She only had eyes for the newcomer.

- Do you think he has a girlfriend?" she asked.

- What does it matter?" replied Vicky.

She scrutinized the stranger with a laser-precise eye, lingering on the luxury watch strapped to his wrist, the designer jacket propped up on his chair, the state-of-the-art smartphone in his hand.

- Jenny, I think he meets all the criteria," she declared. All we have to do is approach him.

- Ah, at last!" exclaimed Jenny, jumping to her feet. I've been waiting for this since he came in!

Vicky hooked his arm, stopping him in his tracks.

- Hey there, not so fast! I never said we had to hit on him right away. He has to notice us first!

- Really? But usually...

- Usually, we're looking for 8/10s. Now we're in a different league: we have to be careful in our approach. First, we get to know him. Then we attack. Do you get it?

Vicky suddenly glanced over Jenny's shoulder in alarm.

- Ah, bummer! Murphy's coming towards us... He looks like he wants to talk to you, Jenny, he's looking in your direction!

Jenny turned green and ran out of the canteen at full speed. Murphy was a disgusting-looking geek, depressive and suicidal, who begged her to go out with him every time he saw her. Every time, Jenny sent him packing, but Murphy was as sticky as gum.

Karine looked around the room in astonishment.

- Where is he? Where is he? I can't see him...

Vicky just giggled.

- What an idiot! It's always too easy with her... Well, Karine, follow me. It's time to approach our handsome stranger!

Under Karine's stunned gaze, she crossed the canteen, rolling her hips. Absorbed by his smartphone, the newcomer didn't see her approach.

- Hi, handsome," Vicky purred, leaning back at her table. I don't think we've been introduced...

The newcomer looked up wearily. As soon as he saw her, however, his expression brightened.

- I'd be surprised, too," he says with a wink. Otherwise, I'd remember!

- Ah! Ah! What a charmer," Vicky simpered, batting her eyelashes. I saw you sitting there all alone, so I figured a good-looking guy like you must be disappointed to end up here.

The boy burst out laughing.

- Well, you know, all high schools are alike: the same disgusting canteen and far too many hours of classes!

- Tell me about it!" says Vicky, sitting down opposite him. I spent all of junior high school in this school, it's deadly. But now that you're here, things might get a little more interesting... What's your name? Where are you from?

- Ryan. I used to go to high school in the next town over.

- Really? And why did you leave?

– I was expelled.

Vicky was speechless.

- Expelled? Like... permanently? What'd you do?

"Do you want the official reason, or the real reason?" Ryan replied, giving her an ice-white smile.

– The real deal, of course!

– I dumped the principal's daughter.

- Nooo!" breathed Vicky, her eyes sparkling.

– Yeah. So she arranged for me to be expelled. Anyway, I was fed up with that high school. Here, I'll have peace!

"I'm not complaining," Vicky assured. You increase the overall level by one point!

Once again, Ryan burst out laughing, drawing all eyes to him. Several girls murmured to each other, looking jealous: once again, Vicky had managed to double-cross everyone. She casually consulted her laptop and stood up.

- I've got to go, I've got gym class. Would you like to get together tonight? I can show you the interesting spots downtown.

- That works !

Vicky blew her a kiss, then led Karine towards the exit. When they were outside, she let her joy burst forth.

- Ah! Finally a guy who could live up to my standards in this lame-ass high school! I knew one day I'd find the right role model! You know what, Karine? In two weeks, I bet you I'll be his girlfriend!

Karine didn't answer. She felt a little guilty: Vicky had managed to get rid of Jenny, and as Karine had witnessed the whole scene, she was

an accomplice in spite of herself. Which put her in a tricky situation. Should she tell Jenny the truth? Alas, in such a case, Vicky risked giving her a hard time...

She didn't have time to think about it any further: John John suddenly appeared.

- Well, hello there!" he says to Vicky. I just ran into your friend Jenny. She's not into riding home anymore. It's your lucky day!

- I'm sorry, but I don't go for second markdowns," Vicky replied. You should have picked me when you were still popular. I'm going out with someone else tonight, and he's three times more interesting than you. Ciao!

And she left John John there to go to her PE class.

CHAPTER 3

Investigation and espionage

Ding ding!

The bell at O'Malleys, the downtown café, jingled merrily as Karine pushed open the door at 6:30 pm. She quickly located Vicky and Jenny, already seated opposite the entrance. As usual, the two girls had commandeered the most comfortable spot in the room, which also enabled them to spot the arrival of any boys. On this day, however, they were glued to their smartphones.

"Hi," said Karine, putting her backpack on the bench. Sorry for the delay, I had to...

- I've got it!" exclaimed Vicky at the same moment.

Jenny hastily raised her head.

- Well then? Out with it!

"Ryan Fortier," Vicky said, sliding her finger across the screen.

Damn, he has at least a thousand friends!

- Are you stalking on him on Facebook now?" Karine asked, sitting down in the last empty seat.

Her question remained unanswered: her two friends were tapping the screens of their cell phones to scroll down the page.

"He put 'single!'" said Jenny in a shrill voice. Hiiii! Vicky, it's a sign!

– Friend request, check! Vicky announced.

- The same!

Jenny clutched her smartphone close to her, jumping up and down on the bench.

- It's so nice to have a nice-looking guy in this town! I've never been so eager to get back to class! Just my luck, I've got a new pair of boots with even higher heels. I could wear them tomorrow!

- If I were you, I'd wait a day or two," says Vicky. You don't want to be noticed too soon, you know...

Jenny suddenly let out a high-pitched scream:

– I found his Instagram account! Vicky, look, SEEE!

Vicky rushed to her screen, and Karine leaned over to look. The page featured a laughing Ryan by the pool, Ray-Bans on his nose – and an impressive number of followers. He appeared in almost every photo: on a motorcycle, in a gym, in a suit...

"He looks like a supermodel," Jenny said, blissfully.

- But the competition is tough," remarked Vicky, who was inspecting the other photos.

She was right: the majority of group shots depicted Ryan with other girls. There were blondes, brunettes, auburns. All were very pretty and dressed in tight-fitting clothes that showed off their impeccable plasticity.

- Bah! He did tick 'single', after all," Vicky decreed. Now that we're on the case, the exclusivity is ours! Here's what I suggest: we wait a couple of days, make sure he spots us, and then ask him to come Saturday night to...

Karine soon lost the thread of the conversation. After a long day at school, she was far too tired to be interested in her friends' schemes. Her gaze wandered to the café's window, reflecting the room that was superimposed on the street. Deep in thought, she followed with her eyes the blurred silhouettes of passers-by: mothers or fathers with their children, exhausted workers, little old men with their shopping bags. Suddenly, a familiar silhouette appeared in her field of vision.

Her heart leaped. Long brown hair, black shirt, dreamy expression… Dan. The boy she secretly had a crush on, the one who…

Vicky snapped her fingers under Karine's nose, tearing her away from her contemplation.

– Hey! What are you doing here, dreaming about an ugly person? Okay, I'll repeat one last time: you'll have to do our homework for next week. That'll free up our evenings for Ryan.

– Next week? But… I've already done all your exercises until Friday…

- So what? When you love, you don't count.

- We really need our evenings," says Jenny in a pleading voice. Try to put yourself in our shoes, Karine! We can't be beautiful, win over Ryan and do our homework!

- Yes, but next week I have all my tests...

Jenny sniffed, then dabbed her eyes with a napkin.

"Okay, okay!" Karine said quickly. "Don't cry, Jenny, I'm truly sorry…

Give me your notes, I'll take care of them."

Jenny immediately stopped sobbing and threw her arms around her neck.

- Thanks, Karine! You're the nicest ugly girl in the world!

In no time at all, a jumble of notebooks, loose sheets and photocopies piled up in front of Karine. She had planned an evening of arcade games on Friday night, two hours of basketball on Saturday, and a night off. She could say goodbye to all her little pleasures. But wasn't that the price she had to pay for being friends with the two prettiest girls in school?

– Vickyyy ! Dépêche-toi, ma chérie, je dois y aller !

Vicky's father's voice echoed through the entrance hall, rattling the glass doors.

Sitting in front of her mirror, Vicky shouted back:

– J'arrive, papa ! Juste une minute !

Concentrating, she touched up her make-up one last time, then took a step back to judge her general appearance. Not bad...

- Vicky ! Je vais être en retard !

- Yes!" exclaimed Vicky in exasperation. Coming!

She grabbed her backpack and raced down the stairs: her father wasn't known for his patience. She usually left the house at 8 a.m., which gave her time to polish her look. But that morning, she'd asked her father to drop her off at school half an hour early: she wanted to be sure to intercept Ryan as soon as he arrived. It was well worth skipping breakfast! She met her father in his brand-new luxury Mercedes. The engine roared to life.

– Eh bien, ma chérie, tu es bien matinale aujourd'hui !

– Plus ou moins. said Vicky. Il faut que j'avance mes devoirs…

– Excellente nouvelle ! Peut-être que tu n'auras pas besoin d'aller au stage intensif d'français, cette année !

Vicky gritted her teeth. To her French-speaking father, it was unacceptable that she still hadn't mastered French. Whenever her grades dropped, her parents would enroll her in an intensive French course. But on this particular day, she had other things on her mind. She waited impatiently for her father to pull up in front of the school, then leapt out of the car.

- Merci, papa ! À plus !

The car immediately started up again, to the amazement of the high school students already present. It was 7.50 a.m. and the schoolyard was almost empty. Vicky sat down on a bench near the gates. Students from neighboring towns were usually the first to arrive. This would probably be the case for Ryan, and she began to observe the arrivals one by one, hoping to catch a glimpse of him. She waited ten minutes, then took out her smartphone to occupy herself, while frequently glancing around the courtyard.

"Hey, Vicky, how are you?" came an uncertain voice.

Vicky looked up and discovered a boy with oversized jeans smiling awkwardly at her.

- Would... would you be up for coming to my birthday? It's next week, and...

- Apparently, we're a reflection of our five best friends," says Vicky. From the look on your face, there won't be many interesting people, so no.

With his head bowed, the guy moved away, clearing his field of vision. Alas, Ryan was still nowhere to be seen. Nor did he arrive at 8:05, nor at 8:15, when the students began to stream in. Vicky spotted Karine from a distance, but she was in no mood to talk to her and deliberately ignored her.

When the bell rang, Ryan was officially absent. Vicky resigned herself to going to class, rage in her heart. On the second floor, she stopped in front of the large bay window overlooking the courtyard, in a last-ditch attempt to catch a glimpse of Ryan. A head of red hair suddenly caught her eye.

Leaning against the gate, Jenny chatted with the handsome man, who was also late. He gave her a smile worthy of a toothpaste ad, and when they parted for class, he seemed as delighted as she was. Vicky followed him, seething with anger. In one minute, her whole plan to overtake Jenny had fallen apart.

- Hey, Karine! Pssst!

Recess had been going on for a good ten minutes when Karine left the gym. Like every Thursday, she had a smile on her face: this term, basketball was on the program, and she was excelling at it. She was so lost in her daydream that Vicky had to call her a second time.

– Hey, hello! she said cheerfully. How are you…?

- Is Jenny in there?" cut in Vicky, waving her chin behind Karine.

She had a large binder in her arms and seemed to be in a very bad mood. Karine scratched her head.

– I think she has P.E. right after me, yeah. What's up?

– Oh, it's nothing. Was she with Ryan?

– Uh… no…

– Great. Bring her back this instant!

Karine easily found Jenny at the entrance to the gym: a good half-dozen boys were milling around her. Jenny ignored them, tapping away at her smartphone with a concentrated expression.

- Jenny!" called Karine. You got a few minutes? I think Vicky has a binder for you.

- Ah! It must be the one with the photos of Chris Daryl that she has to give back to me!

Her joy was short-lived: Vicky was waiting for them on a bench, the open binder on her lap. However, instead of photos of Chris Daryl, it contained only a chart with the days of the week. Vicky handed Jenny a pink highlighter.

- What's this all about?

- Our schedule for the month! Vicky replied, uncorking a green highlighter. I've been thinking: if we both want to hit on Ryan, we have to take turns. That way, we start on an equal footing.

- But... it's a bit complicated, isn't it? Let's do what we did with John John: we talk to him when we see him...

- Out of the question," Vicky decided. This time, we're getting organized. Rule number 1: no hitting on Ryan on school grounds. Rule number 2: we take turns going out with him after school. It'll be more practical.

Jenny remained silent, immersed in an intense mental calculation, then dropped onto the bench.

– Sounds like a plan to me! How do we do it?

Vicky patted the fourth column with a sharp nail.

"Next Thursday, I had something with John John, but I'm available. I take that evening.

"And me, on Wednesdays," Jenny said, writing a fluorescent pink cross in the third column. And the following Monday... Ah, damn, I have to watch my little brother...

"No problem, Karine'll keep him busy." So, on Monday...

Stunned, Karine watched her friends fill the board with big marker strokes. In a few minutes all the columns were filled with pink and green crosses. Karine had the impression that there were more green crosses than roses, but Vicky closed the binder so quickly that she didn't have time to count them.

"Aaah! It's been a while since we've had a sleepover! Jenny cried. I'm ready for the movie, girls! Are you coming?

Sitting on Karine's bed, she adjusted her ultra-short nightie, more suitable for a summer night than a cold autumn evening. It was Saturday, night was falling, and as every time they had nothing else on the program, the girls met at Karine's house for their traditional sleepover.

- I hope you've got an interesting movie lined up," Vicky said, settling down next to Jenny with a bowl of popcorn in her hands. Not one of your lame ones set in Siberia.

Leaning back at her desk, Karine barely heard him. There were so many sheets, books and Post-its in front of her that she felt like she was swimming in an ocean of paper. She'd spent the day solving calculations, completing maps and analyzing texts. By the end of the day, her vision was blurred.

- I'll be another ten minutes, girls," she says in a weak voice. Start without me.

–Bah! We can wait," said Vicky, slumping on a pillow. Anyway, I would have preferred to go out with Ryan... But hey, since he's not available tonight, it frees me up for you. Jenny lay down on the bed, gazing at the ceiling in wonder.

- This guy is so amazing! He's as gorgeous as I am, we have the same tastes, and what's more, his mother has a cool convertible! He took me for a ride yesterday: it was almost better than John John's Kawasaki!

A flash of jealousy lit up Vicky's eyes.

- By the way, where are we in the schedule?" she says. I'm next,

aren't I?

Jenny straightened up.

- Hang on... you got it this morning!

- Nonsense! First of all, I counted, and you got more than I did this week.

- You've had it Tuesday, Thursday and today! I'm entitled to three days too. Karine looked up from her desk. Her two friends were glaring at each other. She hurried to close her notebooks.

- Girls, you're not going to argue about this! You've seen it all week: enjoy the evening instead...

Without listening, Vicky pointed a threatening index finger at Jenny.

- You're the one who's cheating: I saw you talking to him the day before yesterday in between classes!

- That's not true at all! I'm sure you've never been in his convertible because he thinks I'm hotter.

- He told me I was the most interesting girl in school. At least I don't just giggle when he talks! Given the choice, he'd obviously prefer to date only me!

Jenny leaned forward, fists clenched.

- Want to bet?

They stared at each other for a long moment, then, in one motion, turned away to pull out their cell phones. They immediately went to Ryan's Instagram profile. Silence fell over the room.

A little worried, Karine stared at Vicky, who was staring at her screen, lips pursed, then at Jenny, mouth agape. She stood up to glance at their cell phones and understood the reason for their silence: Ryan's selfies showed him either with Vicky, clinging to her arm, or with Jenny, who was kissing him on the cheek, leaving a trace of lipstick. All the other girls had disappeared.

- You see, he likes you both," she remarked. There's no need to

bicker...

Vicky and Jenny didn't answer. They seemed fascinated by their respective images. Below them, the number of "likes" was exploding, and the comments were each more flattering than the last. They faced each other, jaws clenched.

- I saw him first in the canteen," says Vicky. He's mine.

Jenny clenched her fists again.

- Certainly not! I'm much better with him. I'll be his girlfriend and nobody else!

They glared at each other.

"So you won't get out of my way?" Vicky hissed.

– In your dreams, bitch!

Vicky nodded. Then, without a word, she grabbed her pants and top, got dressed, and strode out of the room. Moments later, the front door slammed shut.

What Karine feared had just happened: war had been declared.

1. Vickyyy! Hurry up, darling, I have to go!
2. I'm coming, Dad! Just one more minute!
3. Vicky! I'm gonna be late!
4. Well, darling, you're up early today!
5. Sort of. I need to do my homeworks…
6. Good ! Maybe you won’t need to go to the French Summer Camp, this year.
7. Thanks, Dad! See you!

CHAPTER 4

Candid Camera

– Darling, I've told you a hundred times: chew slowly. Otherwise, you'll store everything in your butt.

Vicky's mother's voice echoed off the immaculate walls of the family kitchen. Vicky dug her spoon so hard into her bowl that a squirt of soy milk spurted out. Her sister Rebecca snickered.

- Don't hit your bowl, Bouboule, you'll have even less to eat!

Vicky stuffed a huge mouthful of boiled oats into her mouth to prevent herself from retaliating. It was 7:30 a.m. and her day was already ruined: her mother had forced her to weigh herself, found that she had gained two hundred grams and reduced her breakfast to a portion of porridge and a green tea. All to the laughter of her sister Rebecca, who never missed an opportunity to make fun of her. As if she didn't have enough trouble already!

In a foul mood, she wolfed down the rest of her breakfast without looking up from her bowl. She'd just had a terrible weekend: after her fight with Jenny, she'd gone home and never left. Usually, there were

always one or two boys willing to take her to the movies, but her flirtation with Ryan had discouraged her usual admirers. Result: she was on her own. The shame. If she didn't get hold of Ryan soon, her reputation would suffer.

- Vicky! Vicky! Are you listening to me?

Vicky looked up. Fitted in an impeccable white suit, her brown bob cut to the millimeter, her mother stared at her, index finger on her watch.

- We're leaving in five minutes. I hope your bag is ready.

- You don't have to drive me to school: I take the bus.

- What's the matter with you?" said Rebecca, suspiciously. Does your John what's-his-name have to take you, or what?

- Never mind. See you tonight!

Vicky hurried out of the kitchen to avoid an interrogation. A few minutes later, she was standing in front of the bus stop, blowing into her hands to warm up. On this Monday in October, the morning temperature had plummeted again, and the trees had lost their leaves in the space of a weekend. Everything was gloomy and gray... just like her mood.

Of course, Vicky would have much preferred to drive to school, snug in the leather interior of her mother's Porsche. But between comfort and victory, she had to choose. Sure, her maneuvers to keep Jenny away from Ryan had failed, but now that the war was declared, an ocean of possibilities opened up for her. She may have been number 2 behind Jenny, but in the field of manipulation, she was far better.

But where to start?

Vicky had been wondering about this all Sunday. Lacking ideas, she

had set about spying on Ryan on all the social networks. By cross-referencing information, she found out which bus line he took to get to school. As luck would have it, the line in question passed close to her home. She immediately decided to calculate her itinerary so as to find herself on the same bus as Ryan. That way, they'd arrive at school together. Jenny would be green! The school bus horn drew her out of her thoughts. She validated her ticket and took a seat at the front, to make sure she could intercept Ryan when the time came. The bus closed its doors with a hiss and set off.

Gradually, the chic neighborhoods where Vicky lived slipped behind the glass, giving way to streets lined with apartment blocks. With her chin on her fist, she watched the facades go by, counting the number of stations left. Finally, the bus slowed down with a squeal of brakes. Breathless, Vicky checked her reflection in the window, then shifted slightly, ready to call out to Ryan as soon as he appeared...

A familiar chuckle cut her off.

- Hi hi! You're so right, Ryan! Vicky felt the hairs on her arms stand on end. She hunkered down in her seat to hide herself, glancing down the aisle. Jenny sat two rows away, accompanied by Ryan. He wrapped an arm around her shoulders and whispered:

- I've always dreamed of meeting a redhead. It really makes my hair pop...

“That’s right,” Jenny said, batting her eyelashes. “A brunette and a redhead… we look so good together!” The bus moved. Vicky’s mood had turned from gray to black. She tried to distract herself by looking outside, but Jenny’s shrill voice was still ringing in her head.

“A brunette and a redhead… we’re so well matched!”

It was at that precise moment that an idea came to her. Abstract, absurd... but promising. Vicky let it grow quietly, a small smile on her lips.

When the bus stopped in front of the high school, her idea was ready.

History essay (J)

Text explanation 4 pages (V)

Geography lecture (V)

Exercises 13 to 24 maths (J)

SVT research (V)

Daycare at 5 p.m. (J)

With a heavy sigh, Karine turned the page of her diary to read the tasks ahead. She immediately regretted her action.

Lately, the homework had piled up so much that she felt completely overwhelmed. Normally, she could manage without any trouble, but with three times as much work, it was a different story.

Alas, she had no choice... What would Jenny and Vicky say if she let them down?

Karine took a deep breath and entered the cafeteria. At mid-morning, the place was almost deserted. Only those who, like Karine, didn't have classes were there. Out of the corner of her eye, she spotted Ryan immersed in his smartphone. For once, he was alone. Unlike usual, he wasn't smiling, and Karine thought he looked sullen, almost sad. She sat down at one of the empty tables and took out her huge stack of books. She had two hours ahead of her: if she wanted to catch up, she had to complete four assignments...

She had just started the second math exercise when she heard:

- Hello, Karine! How are you? Karine looked up to see Dan. He had his backpack on one shoulder and was smiling at her. Her heart began to race.

- I'm... I'm fine. And you?" she said shyly. Aren't you in class?

- Never at this hour," replied Dan. It's funny we've never met! You're usually pretty unapproachable...

- Me?" gasped Karine.

- Well, Vicky and Jenny won't let anyone near you! May I?" asked Dan, indicating the chair next to her.

Delighted, Karine pushed her notebooks aside to clear the table. Her day had just brightened up: it was the first time she'd spoken to Dan without her friends around. He pointed to her stack of sheets, looking intrigued:

- Is this all your homework? My teachers are much less demanding, it's weird.

- Er... Actually, these are Vicky's and Jenny's copies. They're too busy these days, so they asked me to help out.

Dan gave her a look of compassion.

- And you have a lot to do?

- Well... in just about every subject. But I'll be fine!

- All the same, they're exaggerating," says Dan, frowning.

His gaze suddenly fell on the notebooks scattered on the table. He raised his head in surprise.

– Wow, so you know about Piotr Jakopec's films?

Karine noticed a DVD sleeve sticking out between the notebooks. She had slipped it into her bag that morning to return it to the library.

"I'm a fan, actually," she admitted. "I love discovering foreign arthouse films; it's fascinating." Dan's face lit up.

– That so? The little cinema near my house actually shows independent films once a month! If you're interested, we could…

– A date at the movies? Seriously? a voice said.

Karine and Dan turned their heads. Ryan had just stood in front of their table, a cup of coffee in his hand. He seemed in a very bad mood and had clearly been listening to their entire conversation.

"That's so cute," he snickered. "You sound like two fifth-grade students. Did you know that a first date at the movies is completely cheesy?"

"It's a cinema that shows excellent independent films," Dan said undaunted. "I know Karine is interested in it; this is a chance to introduce it to her."

Ryan laughed.

– Discover independent films? I'm glad I never followed your methods, otherwise I'd still be single!

- Because you're not single right now?" replied Dan.

Ryan suddenly stopped laughing. A grimace twisted his face and, for a split second, Karine had the impression she was looking at Vicky. He pulled himself together almost instantly. A charming expression softened his features and, with an easy gesture, he turned a chair around to sit on the other side of Karine.

I realize I often see you with Vicky or Jenny, but we haven't actually talked, have we? You're Karine, right? The one who's into basketball? I think I spotted you on the court the other day.

Karine blushed.

–Well, y'know, that's me. I've been at it for about five years.

"You're super talented. Do you participate in championships?

Karine squirmed in her chair, intimidated.

–No, not yet. One day, maybe... But I need to train more.

–You're kidding? You have more than enough to be in the junior category!

Ryan leaned over her, lowering his voice as if it were just the two of them.

– I have a friend who is playing this weekend. If you want, I can take you to see the match, you'll see the atmosphere... I'm sure you'll like it. Just you and me... What do you say, my dear?

–Uh... I... Ben...

Ryan reached out to her, an irresistible smile on his lips. Karine cast a hesitant glance at Dan.

–Uh... That's nice, but Dan has already offered me something for this weekend, so...

Ryan's features hardened, but he quickly regained his charming pout that Karine almost thought she was dreaming.

"The weekend after, then?" You'll see, it'll be super cool. It might even help you to participate in future competitions!

– Well... okay," said Karine, red as a peony.

–Awesome! I'll pick you up in a car." Ryan straightened up, and at that moment Karine suddenly noticed two things. The first was the presence of Vicky, half hidden by the cafeteria door, who was eavesdropping on their conversation, smartphone in hand. Pale with fury. The second was Ryan's satisfied look who stood up and said to Dan:

"And that's how you have to go about flirting." But don't worry, old

man: I'll leave it to you. You are better together!

Bursting out laughing, he left the cafeteria, leaving a stunned Karine. She barely had time to recover from her emotions: Vicky rushed at her and grabbed her tank top.

–How dare you?! she spat in his face. Traitor!

"Vicky, wait!" It wasn't me, he was the one who ...

"Are you kidding me?" Vicky roars, waving her smartphone. I filmed everything! You're flirting with him behind my back!

"Karine is telling the truth," Dan interjected.

He stood up to push Vicky aside, visibly shocked by her attitude.

"Ryan started it. Karine did absolutely nothing.

"You, the mop, I didn't ring you!" Vicky barked.

"Vicky, I swear, I had nothing to do with it!" Karine exclaimed, panicked. Ryan doesn't interest me. He was just joking, that's all! Didn't you hear what he said when he left?

She had never seen Vicky in such a state of fury: red spots had appeared on her cheeks and it looked like her eyes wanted to burn her on the spot. Fortunately, Karine's last words seemed to make her think. Her face gradually returned to a normal color, and she said:

"I hope you're telling the truth. If you lie, I'll pulverize you!

"I promise you that—"

"We'll discuss it again." I came to tell you about Jenny: I need you to do me a favor. Get out, it's confidential," she tells Dan.

He shrugged.

–Very well. Hi, Karine.

Mortified, Karine answered him with a small wave of her hand. Dan walked away without a backward glance, looking a little offended. He was probably angry with her for having agreed to see Ryan after him... What an idiot!

–Hey! You are listening to me?

Karine shuddered. Vicky was waiting for his answer, her smartphone turned towards her. A cosmetic bottle was displayed on the screen, adorned with the words "Dream Mane".

"Q... What?

"I was telling you," Vicky repeated annoyedly, "that you have to go and buy this from me. It is an ultra-effective hair mask. You can find it at the Stefora shop in the city centre. There is a prank shop next door. You'll have to buy a spray of paint there – green or blue, it doesn't

matter.

–But... "Why?" said Karine, perplexed.

"Keep busy." But it's very important: I need them before noon.

"Sorry, Vicky, I can't this morning. I still have an hour's break to get ahead with your homework, and then I have class...

"Well, dry! It will take you three-quarters of an hour to break everything. I have two hours of control: I'm blocked. You can do that for me, right?

"But I have a control afterwards, too!" I can go tonight, if you want...

Vicky pursed her lips.

"You didn't listen, or what?" It's urgent, I need them for this lunch! Never mind, go during your lunch break. I can't do that: I have to keep an eye on Ryan. If I leave, Jenny will jump on him!

Karine remembered her endless list of homework, the subject of the test she had revised in a hurry, and felt panic take over.

"Vicky, I would have liked to help you, but I can't!" I have to go. Sorry!

Before Vicky could reply, she picked up her notebooks and books and fled. She knew she was going to have a bad time when she saw Vicky again, but never mind. If she was given an extra chore, she would explode.

CHAPTER 5

Dream rut

"Oh, my poor fellow! What's happening to you? It looks like you've hit a door!

Perched on one of the cafeteria stools, Jenny looked at Karine with pity. The latter leaned on his side and rested her head in his arms: it was so tall that it didn't even need a seat to reach the counter.

"I'm tired, that's all," she said in a gloomy voice.

"I understand, go," said Jenny compassionately. It must be exhausting, to have your face! Karine closed her eyes. She had just gotten out of her control and she felt like she had burned all her neurons. In any case, one thing was certain: she didn't have enough to endure a conversation with Jenny.

–Guess what? chirped the redhead, who hadn't noticed anything. Tonight, Ryan is taking me to a party! He told me that he wanted to introduce me to his friends, we're going to dance the night away, there will be cocktails and tons of petits fours! I can't wait, I can't wait! When

Vicky finds out that, she's going to be disgusted! By the way... Where is she, Vicky?

Karine shrugged.

–I don't know. Certainly...

"Ah, Karine! It's not too soon, I'm looking for you everywhere!

Vicky rushed into the cafeteria. As she passed, the boys became silent: the brunette had given herself a makeover from head to toe. A big braid had replaced her bandana, she wore a tight coral dress and walked on endless platform pumps. An envious flash shone in Jenny's eyes.

"Wow, Vicky!" said Karine. It suits you great!

"Thank you," Vicky said dryly, settling down on the last stool. I have just come back from downtown.

She flanked several shopping bags on the counter. All of them came from ready-to-wear and cosmetics shops.

"Damn it, I decided to go shopping. Since, apparently, you absolutely wanted me to miss class...

–It's not that! I...

"Well, the most important thing is that I found it. Tadaaa!

Vicky proudly took out a "Dream Mane" bottle. It was even more dazzling in real life: the glittery letters took all the light, the imitation crystal plastic sparkled with a thousand lights, and the cork had the shine of gold.

–What's that? Jenny sneered.

"That, my sweetheart, is my lethal weapon. The new mask to enhance the hair! All the stars use it. Soon, compared to mine, your hair will look like hay!

"And the paint spray?" asked Karine. Did you find it...? Ouch!

She interrupted herself, grimacing: Vicky had just kicked her pump. The latter straightened up immediately, looking clear.

"Well, it's going to ring soon, I'm going." See you more, Karine!

She picked up her bags, jumped off the stool and crossed the cafeteria in a current of Chanoul-scented air. Jenny and Karine watched her leave, stunned.

"She wanted this mask since this morning," said Karine. I wonder why...

Intrigued by Jenny's immobility, she turned to the counter and immediately understood: Vicky had forgotten the hair mask. He was enthroned in front of Jenny, sparkling.

"No," said Karine, seeing Jenny's eyes shine. We have to give it back to her...

Jenny snatched the bottle with a voracious hand.

–Certainly not! she exclaimed. You didn't have to be airheaded!

And she escaped from the cafeteria, taking the bottle with her like a treasure.

– "Cover..." your... hair up to... tips, and let it rest... ten... minutes," Jenny read laboriously.

She stuck her nose to the leaflet of the bottle. He had not indicated anything else. Easy! She pushed open the door of the gym and trotted to the girls' locker rooms. She had rushed there as soon as she left the cafeteria: there were ten minutes left before the end of recess, and the locker rooms were still empty. She had time to apply the mask, rinse her hair and leave. The perfect plan.

Of course, she could have waited until she was home. But, if she had to be sublime, it was tonight, for the party with Ryan and his friends. That idiot Vicky had given him the perfect weapon to win the game!

She entered one of the changing rooms, locked it, undressed and rushed to the showers. All without letting go of the precious bottle. The bulb on the ceiling was flashing, making it difficult for her to see well, but she was a little surprised by the color of the cream: instead of being white as in the advertisement, it was green. A weird green, a little irregular.

Bah. It was surely a new marketing stunt!

Humming, Jenny poured a knob of cream into her palm and spread it on her hair. She repeated the operation strand by strand and activated the timer on her cell phone. She had always been very proud of her hair. In the middle of the other blond or brown hair, her red mane blazed, attracting all eyes. She was eager to see the result, with this new mask. It was going to be to die for!

When the timer finally sounded, she opened the water in large jets. The cream slipped from her hair and, after a few minutes of rinsing, she was rid of the suds. The bell had the good taste to ring only at this

moment. Jenny dressed and turned on the hairdryer in the locker room, which must have been a century old, but it worked. When the first students were heard behind the door, she was ready. With a smile from ear to ear, she opened the door wide and went out.

A blinding flash picked her up on the threshold. Dazzled, she stopped. There was a silence, and suddenly dozens of students began to howl with laughter.

– "Dream Mane", the new mask to enhance your hair! Vicky's voice sneered in the midst of the tumult. Hahaha! Jenny, if you could see yourself!

Bewildered, Jenny lowered the hand that protected her eyes. She felt like she had fallen into a nightmare.

It was not ten, nor twenty, but at least forty students who were crowding in the corridor. And instead of the admiring looks she had hoped for, she saw only mocking grins. The girls, in particular, had a great time. In the front row, Vicky was typing on her smartphone.

"And there you go," she says, pressing her screen. A nice photo for Facebook! I had to immortalize your new face... Hahaha!

"What are you doing?" said Jenny, clenching her fists. Delete this photo immediately!

"Oh, certainly not," Vicky whispered. I won't miss such a great opportunity to create a buzz!

Tears welled up in Jenny's eyes. She didn't understand what was going on, but one thing was for sure: her former friend had found a

way to ridicule her in front of the whole school. In her confusion, she did not immediately notice that Ryan was next to Vicky: he was laughing as loudly as the others.

"Hey, Ryan, come to think of it, did you have something planned tonight?" asked Vicky.

Ryan turned to her and winked at her.

– An evening at a friend's villa. Are you interested? I'm sure you'd get along really well with my gang!

"It's tempting," Vicky said, blinking her eyelashes. Shall we take your convertible?

"You look so sublime in this dress that you will go wonderfully with the bodywork..."

–Yes! Vicky cried, jumping for joy.

She walked away, Ryan's arm around her waist. He didn't even give Jenny a glance. Gradually, the students dispersed and Jenny found herself alone in the hallway, still in shock.

–Jenny?

Karine's voice woke her from her bewilderment. The tall blonde walked towards her, looking worried. When Jenny didn't react, she pulled her by the hand.

"Come, let us get out of here."

"What happened?" said Jenny in a trembling voice. What did she say about me, Vicky?

–Uh... nothing," said Karine, uncomfortable.

"Don't say anything! She brought everyone together. Surely it's for a good reason!

Karine began to walk faster, hoping that it would exempt her from answering. But Jenny didn't need to insist. As they approached the exit of the gymnasium, she saw his reflection on the glass doors, and then she understood.

She had dyed her hair green.

CHAPTER 6

Cold shower

–GREEN! Not even red, not even yellow, GREEN!

Planted in front of the bathroom mirror, Jenny tugged at her hair in despair. The neon light mercilessly revealed the extent of the damage. An irregular dye covered his locks, ranging from garish green to khaki. The result was awful.

"My reputation is ruined!" Jenny cried. My LIFE is over! Oh, what am I going to do?

She burst into tears. Karine patted him on the shoulder.

–Of course not... It's just a dye, it'll eventually go away!

"But how long?" Jenny moaned. Two months? Six? I will have died of shame long ago!

Distraught, Karine turned to the mirror, as if the answer was written on it. She and Jenny formed a poor picture: stiffened by paint, Jenny's hair seemed plasticized like that of a wig. As for Karine, she had dark circles three kilometres long. One thing was certain: the bathroom, with its pale light and icy tiles, was not the best place to cheer up.

–Come.

Karine pulled Jenny by the hand. They found themselves in Karine's room, with her bed covered in stuffed animals and her basketball posters. Jenny grabbed a teddy bear and dropped onto a beanbag. She had cried so much that her makeup was tracing large black streaks on her cheeks. It looked like a mutant panda.

"She stole everything from me." All! she cried.

His voice trembled, but this time it was with rage.

"To think that tonight she's the one in the convertible with Ryan... She's going to dance, she's going to meet her friends... And I end up with a witch's head!

"I should have known better," sighed Karine. She wanted to buy a mask and a spray... It was obvious. She mixed them up and she set a trap for you. I never thought he could do such a thing!

"I know she is capable of anything!" Jenny asserted vigorously.

She wedged her chin on the teddy bear, smearing it with mascara.

"She may think she won, but that's not true!" I'm the number 1! She can spill a bucket of paint on me, it won't change anything! I'm going to rot it too, I'm going to...

"Do you really think it's going to make things better?" You know Vicky: when she takes revenge, she looks like Rebecca. Do you really want to make her angry?

"I don't care!" I want Ryan!

"Ryan, Ryan!" said Karine, annoyed. You only have this name on your lips! You're not going to sacrifice your friendship for this guy?

"There is no longer any friendship that lasts!" Jenny spat. She dyed my hair green. It's unforgivable!

For a long time they remained on the bed without speaking. Behind the window, the sky turned dark blue. Neither of them having the heart to do their homework, they ended up dragging themselves into the next

room to watch TV. Unfortunately, it was advertising. Jenny followed a supermodel in a fuchsia dress with a black eye that featured the "Dream Mane" lotion.

"She will pay me for it," she said furiously. I don't know how, but she's going to pay for it!

"Jenny, I assure you, there's no point in getting into his game..."

"There's no way I'm going to let her do nothing!"

"Then be smarter than her," said Karine. You don't have to humiliate someone to get your way.

"But how else can I do it?"

Karine had no idea. She looked absently at another model who was displaying her blonde hair, shiny with a lot of special effects. A bright red bottle replaced the woman while a suave voice extolled the merits of the new Gold & Her dye.

That was the trigger.

"Jenny," she said, straightening up. Take a look! And if the solution... Was that it?

Jenny stared at the TV for a long time, then smiled for the first time that evening.

Ready for later, beauty?
I'm coming to pick you up by car;)
PS: get your bikini ready!

Vicky's smartphone vibrated loudly on her bedside table. Busy putting on makeup, she grabs it with her free hand. When she saw Ryan's message, she wanted to jump for joy.

It was Saturday, but she had gotten up at dawn to get ready. She still had her dream night in the back of her mind: Ryan had introduced it to all his friends, and it had caused a sensation. Better still, he had offered her to spend the afternoon in the great swimming pool of his city. It was the first time he agreed to devote part of his weekend to her: things were getting serious...

What if he asked her to become his girlfriend? Overexcited, Vicky rushed to Facebook to write:

☺ Vicky

Weekend, swimming pool, meeting with the most handsome guy in the world = happiness!

#perfect #whatelse

Like

She hurried to get her swimsuit – a red bikini that showed off her dark skin and would outshine any girl around. She was zipping her bag when an engine roared outside. Minus one!

–I'm coming! she said out of the window.

She put on her heeled boots and trotted up the stairs. Rebecca burst out of the kitchen, where she was watching the street, hidden behind the curtains.

"Is he your date?" she said disdainfully. It looks like he's spilled his entire jar of hairspray on his head. Decidedly, my poor girl, you have no taste...

Vicky slammed the door without answering. For once she could enrage her sister, she was not going to deprive herself of it! Ryan was waiting for him, sitting behind the wheel of a small white convertible. Sure, it wasn't his father's Mercedes, but it was modern and brand new. Ryan gallantly opened the passenger-side door.

"It's my mother's car," he explained. She lent it to me for the afternoon. Pretty nice, right?

"Absolutely!" said Vicky, putting on her sunglasses. It's so hot that you won't even need to pay for the parking meter!

Ryan burst out laughing and started the engine. Comfortably propped up against the backrest, Vicky watched the streets go by. Ryan was relaxed, funny and charming, as usual. If Vicky had been more attentive, she might have noticed that her face darkened at times... but she was far too happy to dwell on details.

"And there we are!" he said, slowing down in front of the municipal swimming pool. You'll see, you'll like it: there's a jacuzzi and hot water

currents in the small pool. Go get in line, I'll park and join you!

Vicky blew him a kiss and got out of the car. A dense crowd waited in front of the pool, mostly made up of groups of teenagers. Vicky assessed the queue, sighed and walked straight to the counter.

–Hey! protested a dark-haired girl behind her. Don't be embarrassed, above all! Some of them have been waiting for a quarter of an hour!

Vicky snubbed her royally and waved her hand at Ryan.

"Hey, oh! Sweetheart! Come, it will go faster here! With his bag thrown over one shoulder, Ryan walked up the line like a model in the middle of a show. A murmur of displeasure arose among the boys, but this time the brunette behind Vicky was silent: she was devouring Ryan with her eyes, like almost all the girls in the tail. Ryan just gave her a quick glance before tenderly taking Vicky by the hand. They entered under whispers of admiration, which made Vicky in an excellent mood.

"See you in the deep end, sweetheart?" she said to Ryan.

He nodded with a gesture. She thought he looked weird, a little distracted. He rushed into the boys' locker room without answering her. Bah! He was probably in a hurry to take a dip...

Vicky went to lock herself in a cubicle on the girls' side. It took her a good ten minutes to adjust her bikini, redo her hairstyle and put on a coat of waterproof mascara. Finally, she went to the pools. There was a crowd: many teenagers were having fun on the diving boards or the slides of the small pool, while the regular swimmers were doing their crawl between the lines of the large pool. Vicky scanned the scene, looking for Ryan among the groups and swimmers... and suddenly saw a blonde girl who, from the other side, was doing exactly the same thing.

At first, Vicky didn't recognize her: the surface of the pool dazzled her, and the girl had beautiful golden hair that didn't mean anything to

her. But suddenly, the stranger let out a piercing cry and Vicky became aware of two things: first, it was Jenny, dyed blonde again. And second, she was heading straight for Ryan, already in the big pool.

Vicky's blood ran wild. She rushed in the same direction as Jenny, dived into the water, and leaned on the ledge with a deceptively relaxed look.

"Aaaah, honey, here you are!" I was looking for you. Say, wouldn't you want to go to the bath, would you? We could...

"Wow, Ryan!

Jenny slipped into the water on the other side of Ryan, all smiles.

–What a surprise! she chuckled. I didn't know you were going to that pool, too! How are you doing?

"Jenny, wow!" said Ryan, surprised. What are you doing here? Great color!

"Oh, I went to the hairdresser, and since it wasn't far away, I decided to come here," Jenny said, stretching her legs out in front of her. Thank you! I'm going to stay blonde until the dye goes off and... Oops, sorry!

She folded her legs to let a girl pass whom she had just hit involuntarily. Vicky recognized her at once: she was the girl she had doubled at the wicket. For some mysterious reason, she gave Ryan an evil look before walking away. The boy acted as if nothing had happened.

"It's too crowded," Jenny complained, throwing back her sparkling hair. Fancy going to the small pool, Ryan? They have a jacuzzi area, you'll see, it's great!

–Downright! Are you coming with us, Vicky? Ryan proposed.

Vicky thinks quickly. She could stay screwed to Ryan and try to regain her advantage as best she could... It could also limit the damage.

The calculation was quickly made.

"Go without me," she said in a loose tone. I don't really like the jacuzzi, I'm going to take the opportunity to swim.

"Okay," Ryan said. Happy breaststroke!

He came out of the water with Jenny, who immediately clung to him. Vicky watched them walk away, completely disappointed.

"Well, you're rowing to look after your boyfriend, it seems!" the girl scoffed.

Vicky gritted her teeth.

"Mind your own business!"

"Oh dear, there's no need to be so aggressive!" He's hot, your boyfriend: don't be surprised that all the girls are circling around him, says the brunette as she sits on the ledge.

She had a slim, toned swimmer's body. She must have come here very regularly, Vicky thought. She looked at his brown hair, nose piercing, and green eyes. Pretty, nothing more. She was pretty sure she'd seen her before. In high school, certainly.

"Anyway, I'll let it go," she said in a bad mood. I've been flirting with him for three weeks, and every time Jenny screws everything up. I'm not going to knock her out with a shovel so that she leaves me alone!

"Why not?" said the brunette.

–What?

The girl slipped into the water, lowering her voice:

"If you want to have it for yourself, you have to keep your girlfriend away for as long as necessary." Otherwise, it will always manage to steal your place. There is no shortage of ideas...

Vicky frowned.

"Are you offering me a wedding ring?"

"All alone, you're struggling. With an accomplice, it would work better, wouldn't it?

Vicky studied the girl for a few moments. The more she looked at her, the more she felt like she knew her. But she couldn't find out where she had met her. And then, she had a sly expression that she didn't like too much.

"And why should you help me, exactly?"

The girl shrugged.

"And why not?" If you want to get the handsome kid back, the best thing is to team up with me. You know Jenny well, and I have ideas to eliminate her. With two people, we can put it out of the race. What do you say?

Vexed, Vicky retorted:

"What tells you that I can't double her on my own?"

"It's up to you, number 2," the girl retorted. Either you stay solo and you continue to lose. Either you accept my help... and you listen to my plan.

CHAPTER 7

Plan B

It's okay, he's gone.
Go!

Vicky received the text just before the end of recess. His heart leaped. She hastened to answer:

I'm leaving. Tell you
when it's OK. A+

As soon as her message was sent, she began to run. She had spent an hour waiting for the signal, dying of anxiety at the thought that it would come too late. Fortunately, it came at the right time: all she had to do was lay in ambush... and to put his plan into action. It was well worth it to dry an hour of French!

His cell phone vibrated, displaying a new text: a simple "OK." The

brunette in the pool had given him her number just before they separated. Vicky didn't know her name, but she didn't care: all that mattered was having an accomplice to put Jenny out of the picture. Then, she would take care of annihilating her accomplice: the brunette was pretty, but not enough to overshadow her. The case would quickly be closed.

She stopped by the lockers at the corner: Jenny was to come and get her textbooks, and would arrive any moment. It was the perfect place to surprise her "by chance". Vicky didn't have to wait long: a familiar snap soon sounded, betraying Jenny's heels. Vicky hurried to stick her cell phone to his ear.

"Hi, Ryan!" she said in a sonorous voice. Really? Do you want us to see each other in an hour?" But... you're dating Jenny today, right? Ah! Yes, I understand... Yes, it's true that it's boring, by dint of...

The clicking of shoes slows down. Vicky went on just as loudly:

"A session at the bowling alley?" yes, why not... We can leave high school together, definitely! See you in ten minutes in front of the students' foyer? OK! I have to go get something in class, and I'll get there. To everything! She put her mobile phone away and listened. Soon after, a rapid "clac-clac-clack" was heard: Jenny was at the other end of the hall, where the fireplace was. Vicky shook her head, dismayed. What a jug! It was decidedly too easy...

With a quiet step, she crossed the hall in turn. She made a detour to the overseer's office, which was empty at that hour, to steal the keys to the hearth. Then she approached on tiptoe. Jenny was in the room, calling out to Ryan. Vicky pulled the door quietly and slammed it shut.

–Hey! Jenny cried. Who is it? I'm inside!

"Oh, what a pity!" replied Vicky, in a honeyed tone.

And with two turns of the key, she locked the students' foyer.

Jenny called and screamed, and knocked on the door, but Vicky went away without a shadow of remorse. In any case, the corridor was deserted: everyone had gone back to class, and when the supervisor came back, Vicky would already be far away. And with Ryan! She quickly typed:

> Everything is OK. I'm going out.

With her hands in her pockets, Vicky walked out of the school whistling Chris Daryl's latest hit. The rest of the schedule was simple: Jenny was supposed to meet Ryan at Tea'nage, the romantic tea room downtown, at 6 p.m. Vicky only had to arrive at 6:10 p.m. She would pick up a Ryan who was surprised to have been left in the lurch – and delighted to find a replacement for Jenny. From there, Vicky would give him a choice: either he went out with her... or she revealed to everyone that Jenny had put a rabbit on her. Ryan wasn't stupid: he would accept. Anything rather than spoiling his reputation as a seducer...

"No matter she's got a big nose,"[1] she hummed happily as she crossed the street.

She suddenly squeezed into the middle of the pedestrian crossing.

A car braked with a screech, biting the white stripes. A cacophony of horns sounds on the track. Vicky suddenly came to herself and crossed the rest of the road. Her legs were trembling, her heart was pounding. But not because of the accident she had just escaped. Skimming the walls, she made herself as discreet as possible to see without being seen.

She hadn't dreamed: Ryan was there, a big smile on his face... and hand in hand with the girl in the pool.

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1. It doesn't matter if she has a big nose...

CHAPTER 8

Council of War

How? What for?

Vicky walked to the bus stop like a zombie. Rung. She had everything planned in her plan: that Ryan was already gone, that Jenny managed to escape from the home... Everything, except the unthinkable: a betrayal of his accomplice. And yet, the facts were there: the brunette had used it to neutralize Jenny, so that she could get to the meeting before her!

How had she managed to seduce Ryan? It was an enigma. Vicky had been watching Ryan closely in high school, making sure no girls approached him. However, the brunette had managed to deceive his vigilance. How had she done it?

"Hey, hi, Vicky! exclaimed a boy on a bicycle. Are you free tonight? I have a cinema ticket for...

"Just go there with your bicycle!" Vicky barked.

The bus arrived at the same time. Vicky went to sit down, holding back a furious urge to bang the chair in front. To take her mind off things, she stuck her nose to her smartphone. She cringed when she came across Ryan's latest Instagram post: sitting at the Tea'nage, he was kissing the brunette on the mouth while reaching out to take a selfie of them.

"Poor idiot! Vicky spat, startling her neighbor.

She scrolled through Ryan's photos, her morale in her socks. She came across the photos of Ryan's previous conquests, and, looking at the dates, saw that they had all been taken in September. Intrigued, she went down again, and suddenly she had a shock: the girl was there. Then everything became crystal clear.

In the blink of an eye, Vicky selected Karine's number and pressed the call button. Karine picked up the phone, but Vicky didn't even give her time to speak.

"Come to my house at once," she said curtly. Crisis meeting. Can you pick up Jenny by the way? She is locked up in the students' home.

"Come in!" said Vicky.

Hesitantly, Karine pushed open the door of her friend's room. She had done it as quickly as she could, but by the time she freed Jenny and took the bus... Usually, Vicky threw a tantrum as soon as she was a minute late, but when she crossed the threshold, her friend gave her a

big smile.

–Ah! You've found Jenny, perfect! Come, girls, sit down!

Jenny stood on the threshold, her arms crossed.

"I came just because Karine begged me. I know very well that it was you who locked me up! All because Ryan...

"Let's calm down," Vicky cut in. Ryan doesn't interest me anymore.

Jenny blinked.

–Huh? But this morning, you...

"Yes, precisely: this morning." Well, do you sit down or not?

Her curiosity piqued, Jenny perched on Vicky's XXL bed. Karine dropped onto a beanbag. Vicky tapped something on her smartphone and showed them the screen.

"Well, let's get straight to the point: do you recognize her?" Perplexed, Karine and Jenny looked at Ryan's Instagram. He posted quite old photos. On most, Ryan was hugging a brunette girl with a nose piercing.

"She's telling me something," Jenny said, frowning.

"That's the girl you bumped into at the pool." And above all... he's Ryan's ex.

–What? Jenny and Karine exclaimed. Vicky nodded grimly.

–Yes. Her name is Justine. They dated for a year.

–But... But how do you know that? stammered Karine.

Vicky shrugged.

"He told us about it, remember?" The first day, in the canteen. He said he was expelled from his old high school because he dumped the principal's daughter. I did my little investigation: she is the director's daughter.

Jenny wrinkled her brow.

"Why do they go out together, then?"

"Because he told us lies. In reality, it was Justine who dumped him.

Jenny opened her eyes wide.

–Really?!

"That's why he changed high schools. He couldn't stand being in the same class as this girl. It must have been his first rake, ha ha ha!

Jenny frowned.

"But then... Why is she with him in the last photo? It dates from an hour ago!

"Precisely, that's the problem: they got back together.

"I thought she had dumped him?" Vicky let out an annoyed sigh.

"Yes, two months ago."

"But then... "Is he going out with her?" said Jenny, looking lost.

"They got back together, I told you," Vicky said. And what's more... thanks to us.

She slumped against the back of her chair in a mood swing.

"That's why he kept going out either with you or with me. And why he posted pictures of the two of us. All he wanted to do was show her that the girls at her new high school were chasing her, just to make her jealous!

–Ah! Jenny exclaimed. So that's why he wasn't just dating me! I thought it was weird, too...

"Yes, well, wait before you rejoice," Vicky squeaked. When the whole school knows that he is dating another girl, we will experience the humiliation of the century.

Jenny pressed her hands to her mouth.

–Oh my god! I hadn't thought about it! It's horrible! How are we going to do it? I don't want to lose my number 1 spot because of a girl who is worth 8.5/10!

Vicky put her cell phone in her pocket, her eyes cold.

"If you want to know everything, I don't want to either." That's why I asked you to come. I have a plan.

She stood up and suddenly pointed an index finger at Karine.

"And you're going to arrange everything."

CHAPTER 9

The two queens

On this Monday at the end of October, the leaves of the trees had all flown away. The low, grey sky seemed to brush against the houses. Wrapped up in their scarves, people crossed the street for yet another day of classes or work. Everyone seemed morose, tired...

Except for the two lovers who were walking to the school.

They walked hand in hand, smiling, making passers-by turn around. The boy was tall and muscular, with brown hair and light eyes. When she was younger, the girl had a nose piercing, ripped jeans and worn sneakers. Next to the boy, she looked banal, and yet he was watching

her with his eyes. Obviously, he was madly in love. He leaned over to her to whisper:

– How about skipping school? I'm never going to endure a day without you.

The girl shook her head.

– I have a presentation this morning. Sorry... next time.

"Then five more minutes."

Ryan stopped to hug Justine and kissed her passionately.

Leaning against the gates of the school, Vicky did not miss a beat of the stage. She grimaced disgusted at the embracing couple.

"This romanticism is pathetic! Can't he go to high school on his own?

"Plus, they don't go very well together!" Jenny added, green with jealousy. A brunette with a fake brunette... Ugh!

She took out her pocket mirror and was instantly soothed at the sight of his reflection. Vicky began to tap the ground with her foot. The two friends had stationed themselves at 8 a.m. at the entrance of the school so that they could intercept Ryan. All the conditions were in place for them to take action... except that Karine was not there. What was she doing? Vicky had insisted: without Karine, their plan would have fallen through!

"They are approaching!" Jenny alerted, lowering her mirror.

Vicky got an adrenaline rush and started thinking at full speed.

Jenny, Karine and she had spent their entire Sunday evening rehearsing their scene. Everything was set up to the minute, and now their plan threatened to fall apart.

Too bad for Karine. Ryan and Justine were going to separate, they had to take action without delay.

"OK, let's go," she whispered to Jenny. Ready? Jenny nodded. As the two lovers approached, the two girls sneered in chorus.

"Here, look, Jenny! Vicky exclaimed in a loud voice. Looks like our dear Ryan couldn't stand to take a rake! Well, two rakes, rather...

"Of course it must hurt!" Jenny added in a flute voice. Have you seen the potato bag he goes out with?

Justine royally ignored the two girls, but Ryan turned around towards them, looking smirking.

"Is that all you have found?" If you're jealous, that's your problem. Leave Justine out of that.

"Our problem?" Vicky repeated. You sure?

Admit that you're disgusted that Jenny and I let you down! If you wanted us to be jealous, you should have chosen a girl at our level...

Murmurs spread through the crowd of students who were approaching, intrigued. Some girls pointed to Justine, whispering behind their hands. Indeed, in front of the two queens of the high school, Ryan's girlfriend seemed rather insignificant. With her jeans with holes in them and her slouching sneakers, she looked dull compared to Vicky and her latest outfit. And her hair, stiffened by a brown dye, could not compete with Jenny's sparkling mane. However, instead of being discouraged, Justine began to laugh.

–Excuse me? You've been the one who wanted to date Ryan all along!

–Yes... until the day before yesterday," said Jenny, shrugging her shoulders.

"When we saw that he couldn't decide between Jenny and me, we thought about it...", Vicky continued.

– And we said to ourselves that in fact we were very happy without him! Jenny concludes with a big smile.

With a perfect set, the two girls plunged back into their smartphones, as if everything had been said. The crowd was whispering.

So, the two queens of the school, after weeks of fierce struggle, had grown tired of their prey? Justine let go of Ryan's hand, looking troubled.

"Is that true?"

"No, not at all! Ryan exclaimed. My love, I had an appointment with Jenny the day we got back together!

"Yes, and I wasn't there," Jenny said.

"Of course, since Vicky had locked you in the students' hostel!" cried Justine.

Vicky raised her eyebrows.

–Really? Do you remember that, Jenny?

–Hmm... "No," said Jenny absently.

–Ah! Yes, it comes back to me," Vicky said, snapping her fingers. That's when we decided to plant this!

–What? cried Justine.

She stood in front of Ryan. Vicky noted that she seemed upset. No wonder: Justine had gotten back into a relationship with Ryan only because she was jealous of Vicky and Jenny. But if they suddenly lost interest in her boyfriend, was it worth it?

"Justine, my darling, they're lying!" "You're not going to believe them, though!" said Ryan, flabbergasted. They've been chasing me since my first day of class!

"Precisely, did you imagine that we were going to wait for three years?" Vicky replied. Tons of boys would kill for a single word from us, I'm pointing out to you. You have greatly abused our time.

"Really?" said Ryan in a honeyed voice. Do you think there's another boy in high school who can beat me?

He approached them, and Vicky felt her confidence fail. Up close, with the winter sun making his eyes so blue, he fully deserved his 10/10. Vicky looked for what to answer, but it was as if her brain was running in slow motion.

Jenny was of no help: she was devouring Ryan with her eyes. It was barely a trickle of drool hanging from his mouth. At their silence, Ryan chuckled.

"I was sure of it," he said simply.

He reached out his hand to Justine.

"Are you coming, my darling?" You're going to be late. The crowd of students split in two as they made their way, hand in hand, towards the bus stop. Vicky watched them walk away, pale. The whole plan that she had spent hours preparing this weekend with her friends had just collapsed miserably... Unless...

Yes of course! Karine!

"What the hell is she doing?" she said between her teeth. She's going to screw everything up again!

At the height of stress, she was about to call Karine, when the bewildered head of the tall blonde suddenly appeared in the distance, dominating the mass of students. Vicky's blood ran wild. She rushed at Karine and grabbed her hand.

"It's not too soon!" she yelled. Follow me, quickly!

She rushed through the crowd, forcing Karine to run behind her, then braked in front of Justine while brandishing her cell phone.

"Do you want real proof?" she cried.

Well, here's one!

Justine grabbed the phone, intrigued. Vicky had activated a video that showed Karine sitting at a table in the cafeteria. Ryan was sitting next to her. They occupied the entire field, which masked Dan's presence. Leaning over Karine, Ryan told her in a charming voice:

"I have a friend who is playing this weekend. If you want, I can take you to see the match, you'll see the atmosphere... I'm sure you'll like it. Just you and me... What do you say, my dear? »

The camera zoomed in on Karine's embarrassed look.

"Uh... I... Ben... That's nice, but Dan has already offered me something for this weekend, so... »

Vicky pressed Pause, freezing the image on Ryan's annoyed features.

–There you go! Not very pleasant, eh, Ryan, to take a wind from an ugly woman? Especially when, a week later, it's Jenny and I who leave you in the lurch... But what do you want, flirting is an art. Maybe you should take lessons... Justine stared at the screen, very pale.

"Ryan, what is that?"

"That's not what you think," Ryan stammered. Finally... I mean... I

wasn't flirting with her, it was for... Justine abruptly moved away from him.

"Once again, you are lying to me!" I should never have given you a second chance. You're really just a poor guy!

Jostling Karine, she strode away, straight towards the approaching school bus. Ryan broke down.

"No, Justine, wait!" I can explain! he cried, hastening behind her. Wait for me, I promise you that... Justine! There was a screeching of the brakes and a honking of the horn: Justine had started to run, crossing the road in the middle of the cars. Thirty seconds later, she boarded the bus. Ryan was left alone on the sidewalk, pale as a sheet. He ends up turning to Vicky and Jenny, trying to regain his composure.

–Bah! After all, you're right. She didn't come close to me," he said casually. Whereas the two of you, on the other hand... The purr of an engine drowned out his words. Vicky and Jenny turned their heads, suddenly overexcited.

"JOHN JOHN!" they cried in a shrill voice.

John John's gleaming Kawasaki appeared in front of the gates. The students moved aside, providing him with a guard of honour. Vicky and Jenny rushed to the bike, overjoyed.

"John John!" Finally, we'll find you... We looked for you everywhere!

"We've thought about it and, frankly, we miss your bike too much!" Are you free for a walk tonight?

"And tomorrow?" Can you take me to class?

John John puffed himself up and walked through the gates under admiring gazes, the two girls clinging to his arms. Neither Vicky nor Jenny gave Ryan the slightest glance and he stood there, forgotten on the curb, disappointed.

After all, what was the point of fighting for a boy, when we could

rule the school together?

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